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Herring Runs – Rite of Spring Begins Along the Massachusetts Coast

BOSTON – Thwarted by dams and imperiled by predators, millions of river herring soldier on each spring. Driven by instinct, they make an age-old annual journey up the coastal streams and rivers that lead to spawning grounds where they were born. Starting this week and continuing into early May, the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries invites the public to view this remarkable spectacle of natural history at several sites from Cape Cod to the Merrimack Valley.

Massachusetts has about 100 individual herring runs. The largest one occurs at the Wareham Street Dam and Fishway on the Nemasket River in Middleboro, where volunteers consistently count more than a million fish each year during the month of April. Herring congregate in a pool below the dam, wait their turn to ascend a fish ladder, and then continue on to more than 5,000 acres of spawning and nursery habitat in the Nemasket's upper reaches.

Rivers in Plymouth, Newbury, Watertown, Weymouth, Wareham, Bourne, Brewster, and Essex also offer reliable herring run viewing opportunities. The Division's "Guide to Viewing River Herring in Coastal Massachusetts" (including addresses, dates, and descriptions of each area) is available at http://www.mass.gov/dfwele/dmf/publications/river_herring_viewing_guide.pdf.

"The yearly herring run is a harbinger of spring in Massachusetts and a unique opportunity for citizens to get outside and connect with nature," said Ian Bowles, Secretary of the Massachusetts Executive Office of Environmental Affairs. "Our Division of Marine Fisheries is keeping a close watch on the state's herring fishery so that this opportunity can continue for generations to come."

This is the second year of a three-year ban on fishing for the two river herring species that occur in Massachusetts - alewife and blueback herring. The Division of Marine Fisheries imposed the moratorium based on data indicating a dramatic decline in the number of spawning adults in most Massachusetts runs between 2004 and 2005. Herring declines are occurring along the entire East Coast, and several other states have also enacted or are considering regulations to reduce or prohibit the harvest of herring. Anglers mainly harvest river herring to use as bait for striped bass. As a substitute, the Division recommends sea herring, a species whose stocks remain healthy.

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River herring are anadromous fish, meaning that they live most of their lives at sea but are born and spawn in fresh water rivers and streams. The Division of Marine Fisheries is pursuing several avenues in addressing the recent decline in river herring populations. Efforts include developing with UMass/Amherst a high-tech digital counting system to better assess populations on important runs; a radio telemetry study (also with UMass) in the Ipswich River; several fish ladder restoration projects; examining levels of herring by-catch; and assessing the impact of removing two dams on the Acushnet River.

The Department of Fish and Game's Division of Marine Fisheries and Riverways Program are currently working on potential dam removals and fish passage enhancement in the Mill River in Taunton, the Neponset River in Milton and Boston, Plymouth's Town Brook, and Gloucester's Little River. Removing obsolete dams can have a profound impact on improving passage for herring and other anadromous fish. Following removal of the Billington Dam in Plymouth in 2002, 95 percent of river herring now swim successfully through the restored reach of Town Brook.

For more information, visit www.mass.gov/dfwele/dmf (click on "anadromous fisheries") or www.mass.gov/dfwele/river.

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